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Worker training plan needs money

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Michigan has way too many unemployed people, refugees of the state's beleaguered manufacturing sector.

Michigan has way too few people qualified to work in the state's exploding health care sector.

The logical solution? Help laid-off factory workers retrain for jobs in health care as well as skilled building trades, auto mechanics and computer engineers.

The obstacle? Money.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm is touting her No Worker Left Behind plan to retrain 100,000 unemployed or underemployed workers, especially those with few marketable skills to qualify them for jobs in high-demand careers. Her administration has diverted \$37 million in 2007 federal grants that are designed to pay for worker retraining.

But Granholm wants to finance the program with \$40 million in state dollars in the next fiscal year, which starts Oct. 31. The reason for her desire for state general fund dollars for No Worker Left Behind is that the state would have more flexibility in how to use it. Federal funds come with lots of strings attached.

Where on earth is there \$40 million to be found in the 2008 state budget, which has a projected \$1.6 billion shortfall?

The program is quite laudable. It would pay up to \$5,000 for each of two years of tuition at any Michigan community college or university. Participants must be preparing for a qualifying high-demand career. (English literature majors need not apply.)

But coming up with the funds, when the state continues to face budget shortfalls and Republicans and Democrats can't agree on spending reductions and tax increases, won't be easy.

Another obstacle is that about half of all qualified nursing school applicants are being turned away because of a shortage of nursing faculty and programs. More than 16,000 people applied, nearly 9,000 were qualified, but 4,238 were turned away because of a lack of capacity, according to the Michigan Center for Nursing.

In her State of the State address this year, Granholm talked about her Nursing Corps proposal to help prospective nursing students start their education. She asked for \$45 million to help train more nursing faculty.

It's clear that the state has a role to play in helping laid-off workers train for new careers in high-demand fields. But first, there has to be money to do it.